



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 2

Nov-2006

Rocking the Cradle to Rocking the World: The Role of Muslim Female Fighters

Farhana Ali

Recommended Citation

Ali, Farhana (2006). Rocking the Cradle to Rocking the World: The Role of Muslim Female Fighters. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 21-35.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/2>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Rocking the Cradle to Rocking the World: The Role of Muslim Female Fighters

By Farhana Ali¹

Introduction

Attacks by the *mujahidaat* are arguably more deadly than those conducted by male fighters and could motivate other Muslim women to adopt suicide as the tactic of choice. The use of Muslim women to conduct martyrdom, or suicide, operations by male-dominated terrorist groups could have implications on the jihadi mindset, challenging more conservative groups such as Al Qaeda, to reconsider the utility of the Muslim woman on the front lines of jihad. These terrorist groups will likely exploit women to conduct operations on their behalf to advance their goals and achieve tactical gain.

Muslim women are increasingly joining the global jihad, partly motivated by religious conviction to change the plight of Muslims under occupation, but others are actively recruited by Al Qaeda and local terrorist groups strained by increased arrests and deaths of male operatives to fight in the name of Islam. Convinced of the operational advantages of using a female fighter, and the media attention she garners—including some sympathy from the Muslim world—men began to rely on women to carry out attacks.

While women enlisted and played a pivotal role in operations, including the veteran Palestinian female Leila Khalid for a myriad of successful hijackings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, counterterrorism experts and analysts rarely focused on female terrorists. According to Dr. Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist, the notion of a woman perpetrating acts of violence “runs counter to Western stereotypes and misconceptions of male terrorists; we assume that women are second-class citizens and rely on the men to run the organization,” rather than challenging our prejudices of women in these terror networks.²

Who Are the *Mujahidaat*?

The *mujahidaat* are identified as Muslim female fighters, but in this study, they refer to female suicide bombers. The historical application of the term originated with the early Muslim women on the battlefield, fighting alongside Muslim men, who provided necessary logistics support, such as treating the wounded, donating their prized possessions for the war effort, and/or encouraging their husbands, sons and brothers to participate in jihad.³

Today, the role of the *mujahidaat* has evolved, to include the increasingly accepted tactic of suicide as the preferred and popular weapon of choice. Within this amended definition, the rules of engagement have been broadened, although nowhere in the historical religious literature is suicide, the killing of non-combatants, and hostility against the aggressor, sanctioned. Noted by an Islamic scholar, “Muslims are reminded in many *ayat* (verses in the Qur’an) that they should never commit aggression even

¹ International Policy Analyst RAND Corporation farhana@rand.org

² Interview with Dr. Marc Sageman, October 2005.

³ Busool, Assad Nimber, *Muslim Women Warriors*, Chicago: Al Huda Islamic Educational Foundation, 1995, pp. 34-35 and 64.

towards their sworn enemies. Their response must not be disproportionate or go beyond the limits of the permission for armed jihad.”⁴

Jihad in the Qur'an

Laden with inaccurate perceptions, jihad is today synonymous with “terrorism”, “extremism”, and “radicalism.” Before the early Muslims were granted permission to fight the pagan Quraysh—the Arab tribe whose belief in polytheism and injustice to the Muslims forced them to retreat to the city of Madina—jihad was, and is, *an act of worship*. A more popular definition is derived from the Arabic root word *jahada*, which means to struggle. For Muslims, regardless of their level of religiosity, jihad is a living, breathing construct.

The more popularly cited verse, *And fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly Allah likes not the transgressors*,⁵ permitted jihad within certain perimeters for self-defense. In these verses, the aim of fighting was threefold: “to stop aggression, to protect the Mission of Islam and to defend religious freedom.”⁶ But these early verses were to be disregarded and new definitions of permissible jihad were created after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924,⁷ attributed in part to the absence of a Caliph who could authorize the proclamation of jihad for Sunni Muslims.⁸

The oversimplification of this term and the abrogation of the “lesser jihad”—or militant resistance—for the “Greater Jihad”, which is the spiritual internal reflection of Self, has historical depth in Islam and is supported by tradition and religious text.

While there are many forms of jihad, all of which are defined by a set of rules, jihad is best described as self-defense. Defense against temptation, defense against Satan, defense against the unjust, and most commonly known in the West, jihad is defense against religious persecution. Senior Advisor of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) in Washington, DC, Dr. Maher Hathout says, “Historically, fighting back against aggressors was prohibited during the thirteen years of the Meccan period...[but] after the migration to Medina and the establishment of the Islamic state, Muslims were concerned with how to defend themselves against aggression from their enemies.”⁹ After years of persecution and living in exile, the permission to fight came in response to a specific set of circumstances, and was “motivated by the fact that the Muslims suffered injustice and were forced to emigrate...without justification.” Among the first Qur’ani verses for fighting is Verse 22: *Leave is given to those who fought because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their habitations without right*.

Today, terrorists maintain that violence is the most effective means of communication. In his martyr video, alleged ringleader of the July 2005 attacks in London, Muhammad Saddique Khan says, “Our words are dead; they have no impact on

⁴ Dr. Louay Fatoohi, *Jihad in the Qur'an: The Truth From The Source*, Malaysia: A.S. Noordeen. 2002. p. 39-40.

⁵ Qu’ran, 2:190.

⁶ Shaltut, Mahmud, “*The Koran and Fighting*,” in Bernard and Lwry, pp. 74-79.

⁸ David Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press: 2005. p. 93.

⁹ Mathout, Maher, *Jihad vs. Terrorism*, Los Angeles: Multimedia Vera International, 2002, p. 49.

you. We talk to you in a language you understand. We give them life with our blood.”¹⁰ Male terrorists contend that armed resistance is a language understood by the West. Bin Ladin’s personal bodyguard, known by the name Abu Jandal, said in an interview, “They [the armed groups] became convinced that the only effective way to stop the United States’ interference is the Qa’ida way, i.e. by direct attacks and armed confrontations.”¹¹ These attacks, in the name of “holy war”, are not representative of jihad but terrorism. Dr. Hathout argues that jihad is not reflected in the United States Government definition of terrorism, described in the Code of Federal Regulations as: “...the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”¹²

Therefore, Al Qaeda and like-minded groups unjustifiably argue that the use of violence is legitimized jihad. But the rules for jihad are clear, and the salient points include: 1) jihad is legitimized when it is “recognized and established [by the] Muslim authority, as a policy of the collectivity of the Muslims, to deter aggression;”¹³ 2) jihad is to be declared publicly in order to be accepted, vice the *coup de main* that Al Qaeda and other radical groups have been known for. Hence, their clandestine lifestyle and operational behavior makes them identifiable with terrorism; 3) jihad is limited to combatants; and 4) finally, the ultimate goal of jihad is to cease hostilities and live in peace, rather than a continuum of conflict that has defined the war on terrorism with Al Qaeda.

How jihad became confused with terrorism is the fault of contemporary jihadist literature that reinterpreted jihad to suit their modern-day needs and struggles. Some Muslim *ulama* (scholars) have justified the use of violence against civilian and military targets by issuing *fatwas* (pronouncements) to grant terrorists permission to fight *outside* the original perimeters of Islamic jurisprudence. These scholars argue that warfare today is asymmetrical, necessitating new rules of warfare, with new strategies and approaches to defeating the perceived enemies of Islam. Hence, suicide operations are allowed, for both Muslim men and women.

Drawing upon contemporary Muslim jurists, verses in the Qur’an were corrupted by terrorists to justify violent acts. Twisting the verses’ intended meaning and taking out of context the established Islamic rules of warfare, terrorists have transgressed the limits of warfare, poisoned by their misunderstanding of jihad, and conflated by mixing local and global grievances of the Muslim world. Religious extremists have conveniently forgotten that Islam is a religion of balance, as stated in the Qur’an, *We have made you a middle people...and He [God] has set the Balance. Do not transgress the Balance.*¹⁴

Why Now?

Since at least 2000, there has been a gradual progression of suicide attacks conducted by Muslim women in new theaters of operation, including Uzbekistan, Egypt,

¹⁰ Aired by the Doha-based Arabs news service, *Al Jazirah*. July 2005.

¹¹ Afghanistan: Usama Bin Ladin’s Former Bodyguard on Al-Qa’ida Organization,” *London Al Quds Al Arabi*, 29 March 2005, p. 17. GMP20050330000064

¹² Definition of terrorism by terrorismfiles.org, <http://www.terrorismfiles.org/encyclopaedia/terrorism.html>

¹³ Hathout, pp. 65-66.

¹⁴ Qur’an, 2:143.

and more recently, Iraq.¹⁵ The attack in Talafar, northern Iraq, by a female suicide bomber came as a surprise, but was predictable. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the latest *coup de main* at an army recruitment center on 28 September 2005 by a “blessed sister”. The Iraqi woman hid her weapon beneath her dress as she stood among job applicants before detonating; a similar tactic was used by women in the Irish Republican Army, who carried bombs beneath their clothing feigning pregnancy or wheeling weapons in baby carriages. The attack in late September was not the first by an Iraqi woman; in April 2003, two women, one pretending to be pregnant, blew up their car at a coalition checkpoint, killing three soldiers.¹⁶ Although attacks by women in Iraq are still relatively a new trend, an intelligence analyst argues that women will likely play a wider role in operations where “jihad is more akin to an insurgency and mobilizes an entire population against a clear aggressor.”¹⁷ That leaves Iraq vulnerable to attacks by female suicide bombers in the near future.

The attacks in Egypt earlier this year by two women remain an anomaly. For years, Egyptian men, not women, cradled the growth of the jihadi movement, which led to the formation of different groups, varying in their membership and orientation. However, the 30 April 2005 shooting on a tourist bus in Cairo by two veiled Egyptian women is evidence that women in the Arab Muslim world can play an increasing role in operations. The women, both in their 20s, were related to the male perpetrator, Ehab Yousri Yassin. Negat Yassin was the bomber’s sister and Iman Ibrahim Khamis, his fiancée; they reportedly shot at the bus in revenge for Yassin’s death by Egyptian authorities, and shot themselves,¹⁸ probably to avoid capture. It remains unclear if the two women intended to commit suicide or chose the tactic to evade an arrest by Egyptian police.

While little is known about the two Egyptian women and their intentions for suicide, the story of a young Uzbek girl illustrates her determination to participate in a suicide attack in March 2003. Nineteen-year old Dilnoza Holmuradova detonated explosives at Tashkent’s Chorsu Market, killing at least forty-seven people, including ten policemen.¹⁹ Dilnoza came from a solid middle-class background, was well educated, spoke five languages, and unlike the vast majority of Uzbek women, she had a driver’s license.²⁰ After dropping out of the police academy she was attending in 2002, Dilnoza began praying regularly, and in January 2004, she and her sister left home without a word to their parents, taking their Islamic literature in the house with them.²¹ Her recruitment by the Islamic Jihad Group, a radical offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), likely resulted in her decision to carry out the operation. Dilnoza’s actions are reflective of a larger problem in Uzbekistan. According to an independent sociologist,

¹⁵ Two female suicide bombers killed themselves and three US Army Rangers at a checkpoint in western Iraq. One of the women appeared to be pregnant, and as she exited the vehicle, she screamed for assistance, according to a US military officer. This attack by Iraqi women was the second attack in less than a week. Liz Sly and Hugh Dellios, Tribune foreign correspondents, “Women kill 3 Rangers in suicide bombing,” 5 April 2003. www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationsworld/

¹⁶ “Woman suicide bomber strikes Iraq,” http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4289168.stm

¹⁷ Email correspondence with a counterterrorism expert, September 2005.

¹⁸ “Attacks injure nine in Egypt,” Columbia Daily Tribune, published 1 May 2005. <http://www.showmenews.com/2005/May/20050501News020.asp>

¹⁹ IWPR Staff in Central Asia, “Uzbekistan: Affluent Suicide Bombers,” RCA No. 278, 20 April 2004.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

the ideological vacuum that resulted in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union—in which people became “impoverished and demoralized”—partly explains why Uzbek women were susceptible to being influenced by extremist organizations.²²

The attacks by women in Iraq, Egypt, and Uzbekistan—three women unrelated in culture, religion, and national identities—is reflective of a crisis in Muslim societies. In both instances, women who had never before conducted terrorist operations, are beginning to challenge their perceived enemies and male-only terror groups. Their actions could provide an impetus for other Muslim women to either enlist in extremist organizations or volunteer for future attacks.

Historical Precedence for Female Fighters

For centuries, Muslim women in different struggles and communities have joined men on the front lines of war, and have died alongside them. The most prominent example of an early Muslim woman in jihad is Nusayba bint K’ab, who fought in the Battle of *Uhud* with her husband and two sons and during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr, she joined the Muslim troops, suffered eleven wounds, and lost one arm.²³ The Prophet’s own female relatives took part in jihad; his wife, Ayesha, led the Battle of the Camel, and his granddaughter Zaynab bint Ali fought in the Battle of Karbala. Other women were recognized for tending to the wounded, donating their jewelry for the jihad, and encouraging their male family members to fight to ensure the survival of Islam.²⁴

The involvement of the early Arab women in jihad is celebrated today throughout the Muslim world, serving as icons and a precedent²⁵ for contemporary Muslim women who choose suicide operations. In modern-day resistance movements, a Christian Lebanese woman, Loula Abboud, “may have been the model for the first Palestinian women who became suicide bombers in 2002.”²⁶ Before Palestinian women made headlines for conducting a series of terrorist attacks beginning in 2002, the dark-eyed petite girl of nineteen conducted a suicide operation in the Bekaa valley in southern Lebanon in April 1985, “exceeding all expectations” for men and women in war.²⁷ Described by her brother as a woman “fighting for the liberation of her own homeland,” Aboud’s struggle for “self-defense” and to “save the children” is echoed by other women around the world, including women of the first Palestinian *intifada*, who led a campaign to reopen schools, taught underground classes for children, and played an important role in “street activism that directly confronted the occupations forces.”²⁸

However heroic the modern-day female fighter may be regarded by her community, contemporary women warriors do not compare to her predecessors, whose sacrifice for Islam is venerated within Islamic textbooks, stories, and historical memory. The involvement of early women in jihad is recognized in the Qur’an and *hadith*, or

²² Ibid.

²³ Busool, Assad Nimer, *Muslim Women Warriors*, Chicago, Illinois: Al Huda, 1995. p.35-37

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 34-35.

²⁶ Davis, Joyce. *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance and Despair in the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave MacMillian. 2003. p. 68.

²⁷ Davis, pp.68-72.

²⁸ Jennifer Plyler interview with Hanadi Loubani, founding member of Women for Palestine. “Palestinian Women’s Political Participation,” WHRnet, 23 November 2003. www.whrnet.org/docs/interview-loubani-0311.html

Muslim traditions. Women also were rewarded for performing the same duties as men. A Qur'anic verse was revealed to reflect the equal status of both men and women: "Lo! Muslim men and Muslim women, and believer men and believer women, and men who obey and women who obey...Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward."

Eager to Level the Playing Field

By taking part in operations, women are contesting the traditional roles assigned to them by patriarchal societies and terrorist groups. While women enlisted and played a pivotal role in operations, including the veteran Palestinian female Leila Khalid for a myriad of successful hijackings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, "the trouble is [that Muslim women] are not on the winning side, at least not yet."²⁹

Her actions ensure, in part, that the discourse of women's rights and position in society remains in the open forum. Attacks she conducts could stir a needed debate in the Muslim world regarding the role of women within the patriarchal "space," that could force existing binding norms into temporary disarray. Reasons why male fighters have welcomed, though previously denied, Muslim women access to operations is explained by organizational and societal needs. Her vital contribution is assessed by the operational advantages and maximized media shock value that has helped to sustain, at least in the interim, by her involvement.

But despite their involvement in war, women did not enjoy equal status with men until a woman from the Quraysh aristocracy, Umm Salama, one day asked the Prophet, "Why are men mentioned in the Quran and why are we not?"³⁰ Her reply came in the form of a verse, "Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender to Allah, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey, and women who obey...Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward."³¹ This verse, alone, revolutionized the Muslim community, illuminating a "break with pre-Islamic practices, the calling into question of the customs that ruled relations between the sexes."³²

Muslim women today often cite the early examples of the *mujahidaat*, but misplace their own struggles within a historical narrative that fails to explain contextual pressures, a term coined by Dr. Karla Cunningham, which refers to the impact of domestic/international enforcement, conflict, and social dislocation. She argues that contextual pressures "impact societal controls over women [and could] facilitate...participation up to, and including, political violence."³³ The cycles of protest these women participate in, often leading to their recruitment into violent organizations, helps to frame their conflicts within a specific contextual background that they are often responding to. For many Chechen women, including Hawa Barayev, the first Chechen female suicide bomber who targeted her husband's assassin, revenge for the loss of male family members is a prime motivator.

²⁹ Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, p.8

³⁰ Tabari, *Tafsir*, Dar al-Fikr edn, vol. 22, p. 10.

³¹ Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, sura 33, verse 35.

³² Mernissi, p. 119.

³³ Cunningham, Karla, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26:171-195, 2003. (p. 172)

In earlier conflicts, women rarely were granted an elevated status, regardless of her participation and at times, leading role in operations. For example, the Algerian women who fought alongside the men in the Battle of Algiers against French colonial rule were instrumental on the war front, but assumed their traditional roles within Algerian society after independence of the Algerian state. Algerian women fought against the French colonial rule in 1958-1964 but returned to their homes after independence.³⁴ Learning from the past, women in the Palestinian *intifada* were determined not to meet the fate of their Algerian sisters. For example, Palestinian women formed a Women's Higher United Council in and in June 1989, "had drafted an Equal Rights for Women bill and placed it before the Unified Leadership....'we wanted the men to know that we have teeth too, said one of the women from the Higher United Council."³⁵

Despite the previous prejudices and obstacles against women, they have an opportunity in present-day conflicts to change the perception that al-Qa'ida and local terrorist groups are a "men" only confederation. Her participation could prove other women that she has a right to the rewards of martyrdom and her action can change the way local governments respond to the war on terror. Many women are determined to raise the gender equality issue. According to Umm Usamah, the success of attacks by Palestinian women elevated the status of the Arab woman and ended the debate about equality between men and women, particularly after Wafa Idris' suicide bombing. Exonerated for being the first Palestinian woman to commit suicide, Idris' likely inspired four other Palestinian women to commit suicide operations within four months. Adel Hammudu, editor of the Egyptian opposition weekly, *Saut al-Umma*, referred to Idris as "the bride of heaven, [who] elevated the value of the Arab woman and in one moment, [and] put an end to the unending debate about equality between men and women."

The unintentional debate that women in conflict arouses is plastic; no conflict today has elevated the status of the Muslim woman, nor attempted to address the societal and religious norms that solidify the role of the Muslim woman. While her participation in suicide attacks serves the overall group or social movement, her individual contribution is seldom recognized, except in martyrdom fests within the Palestinian territories where female bombers are deemed necessary for operational and strategic adaptation against a well-armed adversary.

Diverse Motivations for Female Fighters

Local conflicts are critical motivators. Each conflict is unique and women choose suicide terror for a host of different reasons. For instance, aside from being linked by gender, the *mujahidaat* in Chechnya have little in common with women in Palestine, and women in Saudi Arabia have absolutely nothing to share with their "sisters" in Uzbekistan.

While conflicts and motivations vary, a woman's decision to pursue violent action is impacted by *personal* experiences and outcomes. The absence of change to local conflicts around the world has motivated some women to opt for martyrdom operations to end their suffering. For some women, the decision for martyrdom is rooted within the local struggle for freedom from the social and worldly responsibilities women have to bear within a weak civil society but more importantly, freedom from the tyranny women

³⁴ MacDonald, Eileen, *Shoot The Women First*, London: UK: Fourth Estate Limited, 1991. Pp. 74-75.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 75.

experience as a result of living under occupation, under the reign of despot rulers, and under the jihadist rhetoric and propaganda that convinces women that her local community can not afford inaction. Suicide also becomes the preferred tactic when Muslim women believe that their social structure, which is the fabric of an Islamic society, is threatened or has been violated by the prevailing authority.

Contemporary resistance movements and conflicts have publicly endorsed suicide and male fighters encourage Muslim women to select the tactic for one of the following reasons: to preserve her honor and dignity; to seek revenge for the loss of male family members; to win respect from the larger Muslim community; to gain reassurance for herself and her community that she is a capable and equal partner in jihad; and perhaps most importantly to the violent organization, to ensure *its* survival. Therefore, her involvement in a predominantly male conflict helps to guarantee the existence of the national and/or social movement. In a March 2003 interview with the London-based Arab newspaper, *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, the leader of the women's organization, Umm Usama, said Muslim women join the jihad to seek revenge for the capture of "our brothers Ramzi Bin al Shibah and Khalid al-Shaykh"³⁶—both of whom were detained by Pakistani authorities in 2002 and 2003, respectively.

The perceived threat against Islam is another powerful motivator to sanction the use of violence as an effective means of communication. For all Muslim women, faith likely plays a role, if only a minor one. Men are able to manipulate some Muslim women by shrouding the local or transnational struggle or for which they are fighting in religious undertones. In clever propaganda, they claim that Islam is under attack by Western imperialism, and argue that every able Muslim man *and woman* has a duty to defend the faith. Often, they cite the early Muslim women who fought and supported the early battles during the times of the Prophet to convince women that they are equal partners in jihad. Using historical precedence to argue their point, men could gain new female recruits to take part in future operations. Equally appealing to some women are female fighters who have either staged spectacular attacks or those who have survived in a male-dominated terrorist organization, such as Leila Khaled,³⁷ who said, Islam has "only a role in determining the choice in how the [Palestinian] struggle is to be waged."³⁸

Assured of the rewards of martyrdom, women perceive they have nothing to lose. Printed in a HAMAS monthly publication *al-Muslimah*, Palestinian operative Reem Rayishi said, "I am proud to be the first female HAMAS martyr. I have two children and love them very much. But my love to see God was stronger than my love for my children, and I'm sure that God will take care of them if I become a martyr."³⁹ Even Dilnoza believed she would be granted spiritual rewards for her operation; in a letter to her mother, she wrote: "martyrs without a doubt will go to Paradise." For the believer of martyrdom, subjugation to the faith (i.e., Islam) is rewarding. The individual, knowing

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Leila Khaled, a member of the Marxist group, The Palestine Front For the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), became widely known after her role in a series of airline hijackings in 1969-1970. She is most famously known for leading a daring hijacking of four airlines on 6 September 1970, which resulted in the destruction of three aircraft and her own capture.

³⁸ Westerman, Toby. "Cheerleader for female suicide bombers," WorldNetDaily.com. 31 January 2002.

³⁹ *Al-Muslimah*, February 2004.

that death is likely, “*inspires other Muslims to continue the struggle and the martyr’s death is kindling wood for jihad and Islam.*”⁴⁰

Al Khansaa—A Call to Arms

Among the many functions women serve, their increasing role in exploiting the media and technology affords them a greater chance of broadening their chances for recruitment, even within the most patriarchal Muslim societies, such as Saudi Arabia. The “CNN factor” enables the female fighter to “generate a huge amount of publicity for the cause...and enabled global awareness.”⁴¹ Without television, print media, and now the colossal impact of the Internet, female suicide bombers would gain no less attention than male bombers. Sageman argues that the Internet has changed the amount of *access* women now have to join operations in jihadist chat rooms, which had not existed before. He maintains that there had been a precedent for female fighters, but “now you have the mechanism [the Internet],”⁴² a gender-neutral forum that allows Muslim women to interact with men with a relatively low-cost output and high-value input.

The use of the Internet offers Muslim women in restrictive societies—that adhere to the strict space separation between men and women—to initiate contact with Muslim men, develop relationships, and eventually become full members of radical organizations. Umm Usamah confirmed the extensive use of the Internet:

with those who do not have access to the Internet,
we have formed small groups or cells that
are guided and backed personally and
supervised like those using the Internet.
Each of the women who have joined through
the Internet is trained where she is because
we cannot bring all the *mujahidaat* sisters in one
place as each one is in a different country in the
land of Islam.”⁴³

Among the various influential magazines is *Sawt al-Jihad*, the propaganda arm of the Saudi-based al-Qa’ida network, which could have a significant impact on drawing women to the fight. The magazine’s first issue of *Al-Khansaa*—the new online women’s magazine and also the name of a pre-Islamic poetess who lost four sons to jihad⁴⁴—made its debut in August 2004 at www.kidwi.com/khansa. The publication implores Muslim women worldwide to join the war on terror against the perceived enemies of Islam. For example, in an article titled “What Role can Sisters Play in Jihad,” the anonymous author says, “there are many ways a Muslim woman can participate in Jihad...the sisters’ role on the battlefield [include]: 1. participation in the actual fighting; 2. supporting the

⁴⁰ Lustwick, Ian S., “Terrorism in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Targets and Audiences,” in Martha Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1995. p. 536.

⁴¹ Bloom, Mia, *Dying To Kill*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2005. p. 39

⁴² Interview with Dr. Marc Sageman, October 2005.

⁴³ “Al-Qa’ida’s Women Organization ‘Commander’ on Women’s Role in Jihad,” *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 12 March 2003. p. 3. GMP200303120000069.

fighters in the battlefield; 3. Guard duty and protection.”⁴⁵ *Al-Khansaa* also glorifies martyrs, including Abu Hajir, the former al-Qa’ida leader in Saudi Arabia,⁴⁶ and celebrates the lives of the early Muslims who have died in battle.

Scholars Support Female Martyrs

To isolate this study from the ideological underpinnings of suicide terror, as delineated by some members of the Muslim clergy, would be to misplace the importance of scripture in determining when, and how, violence can be used. The debate now being waged in various Islamic circles about the utility of suicide, and conversely, the use of women in warfare, has divided the Muslim *ummah* (community).

The Muslim clergy have failed to reach consensus on whether suicide is an acceptable means of warfare, but several scholars in the wake of the September 2001 and July 2005 attacks in London have issued various *fatwas* (provocations) condemning suicide bombings. The former head of Al-Azhar Fatwa Committee Shaykh ‘Atiyyah Saqr uses references to historical Islamic literature to argue that the Prophet Muhammad said a believer would be forbidden from entering Paradise if he committed suicide.⁴⁷ More recently, a prominent Syrian cleric, Abdel Mon’em Mustafa Abu Halima, issued a *fatwa* prohibiting suicide operations. A resident of London, Abu Halima, also known as Abu Naseer Al Tartusi, said “whoever hurts a Muslim has no Jihad reward”, and quotes the Prophet as having said: “whoever murders a non-Muslim enjoying protection under the Islamic state would never smell the scent of Paradise.”⁴⁸

However, the practice is justified by other clerics, including Doha-based Shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi and a veteran Afghan mujahid, Abdallah Azzam. Both have justified the use of suicide *and permit women to participate in jihad*. Qaradawi refutes the term “suicide” as being “incorrect and misleading” and prefers the usage of “heroic operations of martyrdom.” In an interview in an Egyptian newspaper, Qaradawi justifies suicide on the basis that it is “the weapon of the weak,”⁴⁹ and provides the following ruling on warfare:

when jihad becomes an individual duty, as
when the enemy seizes the Muslim territory,
a woman becomes entitled to take part in it
alongside men.. and she can do what is
impossible for men to do,” even if it means
taking off her *hijab* to carry out an operation.⁵⁰

Qaradawi first issued a *fatwa* on the role of women in jihad following the suicide attack by Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian Muslim woman to perpetrate an attack on 27

⁴⁵ Strategic Arabic Translations, *Al Khansaa*, August 2004.

⁴⁶ Abu Hajir was killed by Saudi security forces in June 2004.

⁴⁷ ‘Ask the Scholar,” IslamOnline.net. 21 May 2003. www.islamonline.net

⁴⁸ “Salafi Jihadi Trend Theorist Turns against Al Qaeda and Issues a Religious Opinion of the Impermissibility of Suicidal Operations,” *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 2 September 2005. News from Al Mendhar. www.almendhar.com

⁴⁹ “Debating the Religious, Political and Moral Legitimacy of Suicide Bombings,” MEMRI – No. 53, 2 Ma 2001. <http://memri.org>

⁵⁰ “Ask the Scholar,” IslamOnline.net, 22 March 2004. www.islamonline.net

January 2002 when she detonated explosives at the entrance to a shopping mall in Afula, a city in the northern part of Israel. First published on the HAMAS Internet site, www.palestine-info.info in January 2004, Qaradawi said that Muslim women could disregard certain codes of dress and Islamic law to participate in suicide operations: “when jihad becomes an individual duty, as when the enemy seizes the Muslim territory, a woman becomes entitled to take part in it alongside men...and she can do what is impossible for men to do,” even if it means taking off her *hijab* (headscarf) to carry out an operation.⁵¹ Before Qaradawi’s *fatwas*, Abdullah Azzam in his book, *Defense of Muslim Lands*, empowered women when he said they did not need their husband’s permission to participate in jihad. In a separate *fatwa* published in 1984, Azzam said, “jihad was the action required (*fardh ‘ayn*) of every Muslim, regardless of gender.”⁵²

Today, the debate among the *ulama* on the permissibility of suicide continues to divide the Muslim world; some view suicide as a legitimate tactic while others defy it on the basis that it was never employed by the Prophet of Islam, and therefore, suicide is *haram* (forbidden). Many scholars argue that suicide is one of the major sins in Islam that annuls one’s faith,⁵³ and those well versed in religious text often cite the Qur’anic verse, *Al Maeda*, that clearly rebukes those who kill: *He who kills anyone not in retaliation for murder or to spread mischief in the land, it would be as if he killed all of mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.*⁵⁴

A Short-Lived Panorama

The liberal door that now permits women to participate in operations will close once male jihadists gain new recruits and score a few successes in the war on terror. The sudden increase in female bombers over the past year may represent nothing more than a riding wave of Al Qaeda’s success rather than a lasting effort in the global jihad. Male jihadists could find it difficult to accept a female operative as the revolutionary vanguard of Islam, and while younger members of Al Qaeda and like-minded groups are encouraging Muslim women to join the ranks, there is little indication that these men would allow the *mujahidaat* to prevail in their authority and replace images of the male folk-hero. There is also no evidence that Muslim female operatives will have contact with senior male leaders, calling into question the male jihadists’ willingness to directly deal with women on an equal footing.

The more conservative terrorist regards a Muslim woman as key to maintaining the family structure, while the new, younger generation of terrorists could increasingly encourage women to join their ranks to offset the losses of male operatives. She provides the male jihadist with multiple operational advantages, but while she is indispensable to the war effort, she also is expendable.

While a female fighter might not enjoy the same status and rank as her male counterpart, her participation in suicide bombings could, in the near-term, provide impetus for other women to participate in future operations. A Muslim female academic states that “by resorting to this tactic [suicide], women would most likely appeal to the

⁵¹ “Ask the Scholar,” IslamOnline.net, 22 March 2004. www.islamonline.net

⁵² “The Union of Good”, www.intelligence.org.il/eng/sib/2_05/funds_f.htm

⁵³ Abualrub, Pp. 209-211.

⁵⁴ Verse 32.

female Muslims in the world; that is, to those who are not aware, or have been prevented from becoming aware of the actual teachings of the Qur'an."⁵⁵ Suicide arguably attracts to those women who have an alienated view of Islam; that is, they have subscribed to the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, rather than understand the religious verses in their historical context. Coupled with the dire sociopolitical conditions under which some Muslims live, these women probably believe they have nothing to lose in this life, but have everything to gain from *that*-world (the Hereafter).

Should suicide attacks become a trend among Muslim women, it would be the exception rather than the rule. Some terrorism experts understand that the jihad movement is not homogenous, and there are places where social mores are perhaps conducive to more 'progressive' treatment of women's status. Even in Muslim societies where female fighters *are* the norm, (i.e., Palestinian territories) it still remains unclear whether traditional societal norms will make adjustments to afford women equal rights once the conflict ends.

Policy Recommendations: Making Muslims Part of the Solution

Compared to men, Muslim women have participated in a relatively small number of suicide attacks, but increased security measures against male jihadists and the ongoing struggles of national identity, couched in religious overtones and a socialization toward violence, forces Western and Muslim governments to reexamine their counter-terrorism policies. Sageman argues that the solution lies with "countering the entire terrorist movement rather than just the women," and suggests looking at previous terrorism studies for insights. While women are a part of the overall movement, they represent an important element, and therefore, this uniqueness demands specific strategies to counter *female* participation.

Countering the increased use of Muslim women for suicide operations requires a multi-pronged approach looking closely at developing a set of common denominators, such as the factors that enhance a strong civil society, balanced economics, full political participation, and opportunities to question existing, and sometimes archaic, social and cultural norms that restrict women's liberation and democratic movements. To achieve this, Western and Muslim governments need to make a concerted, long-term effort towards improving the social, economic, and political structures in their countries. Without addressing the local concerns, men will continue to recruit women, and rely on female volunteers, to gain visibility through terrorist operations. Negative visibility can be reversed with positive reflections of women helping to steer Muslim women into active members of society. But who has the power to enforce progress and carry this enormous responsibility? A Muslim female academic says she doesn't believe "in the ability of the West to counter this trend, [but] 'believing women,' who are intellectually capable and active in the public sphere, will unread the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and thus will represent the teachings."⁵⁶ Many experts agree that Muslim Governments may have more power to counter religious extremists due to their deep cultural knowledge and understanding of local problems. Any effective counterterrorism policy will need to include the Muslim youth to ensure that their concerns are

⁵⁵ Interview with female Muslim professor in the United States who teaches courses on Islam and gender. September 2005.

⁵⁶ Interview with Muslim female academic in the United States, September 2005.

represented. Absent their involvement, the next generation of terrorists could sustain collective action against the prevailing authority, threatening a government's ability to suppress and manage emerging extremist networks.

While many experts agree that the burden lies with the Muslim world to counter terrorism, the West can help by channeling much needed resources, financial aid, and development to alleviate some of the local grievances. Eroding the power of violent movements and support for militant groups can largely be achieved by encouraging an open political system that includes active female participation, rebuilding civil society, legislating education reform, accounting for human rights abuses and abetting Muslim women's organizations, including religious-based groups managed by women. However, for any of these processes to take shape, the conflicts in the Muslim world must first end. Absent any resolution to the conflicts that resonate on the Muslim "street", violence will remain the preferred course of action.

Strategically, specific policy recommendations for the West should include:

1) Promote democracy and democratic institutions. Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, Akbar Ahmed, says that "there is no alternative [but to] institute and ensure the success of democracy" to close the gap between the rich and poor, to "emphasize the compassionate nature of Islam," and "to rediscover the tolerance that once characterized their societies."⁵⁷

2) Establish a more robust diplomatic relationship with the countries that support terrorist organizations; putting pressure on these countries with the support of the international community, rather than unilateral action, could force the countries that sponsor terrorism *and* countries in conflict to seize hostilities. Playing the role of an honest broker, the US can help mediate conflicts and facilitate dialogue;

3) Provide financial and organizational support to local groups, such as Muslim NGOs, think tanks, social activists, and legitimate religious establishments to help them counter extremist and terrorist elements within their societies. Western aid and resources should only be donated when local institutions guarantee their goal is to improve the lives of women in their respective communities, to include vocational training, access to higher education, and membership to religious-based parties and groups that have often closed the door to women.

The Muslim world has an equal, if not greater, burden to bear. Since most female bombers come *from* Muslim-dominated societies, the governments under which these women live have a responsibility to its people—not just women alone—to eradicate violent organizations. Recommended policies for the Muslim world should include, but is not limited to, the following:

1) Reclaiming the right to *Ijtihad* (interpretation), a tool that can serve as "an effective weapon to cure the cancer of illiteracy, inaction, immobility, and diffidence."⁵⁸ What is needed is a look towards the present and future, rather than the archaic traditions of the past that have handicapped Muslim societies from further achievement. As noted in the Qur'an, *Verily Allah changeth not the condition of a people until they first change their conditions by themselves.*⁵⁹ By reexamining the practice of Islam within Muslim societies—much of which is influenced by culture and a skewed understanding of holy

⁵⁷ Ahmed, Akbar, *Islam Under Siege*, Polity Press: Malden, MA, 2003. pp. 154-155.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, Al-Haj Moinuddin, *The Urgency of Ijtihad*, Kitab Bhavan: New Delhi, India, 1992, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁹ Qur'an, Verse Ar-Ra'd, 13:11

text—a female Muslim academic argues, Muslims need to “unread the patriarchal interpretations of Qur’anic teachings...[and Muslim countries] must allow, even encourage translations of the Qur’an into any language...to diffuse the power of patriarchal structures...to avoid anyone from claiming sole knowledge” of the religion.⁶⁰ Echoed by Akbar Ahmed, rebuilding “an idea of Islam, which includes justice, integrity, tolerance, and the quest for knowledge”⁶¹ is imperative to restoring the classical Islamic civilization, as well as rooting out “deviants” such as religious extremists, terrorists, and anyone who manipulates faith for personal gain. Reopening the gates of *ijtehad* is essential to encouraging the liberal Islamist rationale.⁶²

2) Reserving for women political seats and membership to religious organizations; including women in key government decisions, if not positions, can help improve the country’s public image. Allowing women to participate in all levels of governance is an important way of routing frustration and anger into positive action;

3) Rebuilding civil society, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Nothing could be more important to Muslims today than their basic needs, such as water, food, shelter, and a nominal sense of security. Muslim governments can upset terrorist recruitment in demographic areas that lack these basic needs by ensuring that people are self-sufficient. While terrorism is not always tied to economics, one’s level of frustration with their living conditions—or the poor living standards of Muslims in a distant land—is arguably one of the many motivations terrorists use to join violent organizations. As long as grievances exist, terrorists will have a canon-fodder readily available to gain new recruits and appeal to uneducated Muslims.

On a tactical level, improving Western intelligence agencies, using both human and technical information gathering,⁶³ is at the heart of operational success. First, sensitizing law enforcement to Muslim communities is essential to gaining their trust and cooperation. Training should involve: 1) knowing the enemy; and 2) understanding the various cultural and religious traditions in Muslim communities. By educating the police, law enforcement, and intelligence organizations, targeting efforts and collection activities can be more precise, and less of a shot in the dark. Knowing *who* the enemies of the West—also the demons of the Muslim world—are will help foreign liaison services predict the terrorists’ next move and could encourage support from the local community. But forcing cooperation between Muslim community leaders and the host government is ineffectual unless authorities offer incentives to these communities, such as immunity from arrest, improved access to employment and other public goods that fall under the state jurisdiction. Establishing these relationships is not without growing pains. For example, the Dutch service indicated that relations with its local Muslim communities is dependent on cooperation from the *imam* (cleric) of a mosque or someone who has religious authority, and that, in light of their [the Muslims’] perceived alienation, is a difficult hurdle to overcome.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ E-mail correspondence with Muslim female professor in the US. September 2005.

⁶¹ Akbar, Ahmad, pp. 155-156.

⁶² For more information on this worldview, see Graham Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam*, New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003, pp.54-56.

⁶³ Zedalis, Debra D., *Female Suicide Bombers*, June 2004. <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi>

⁶⁴ Informal conversations with the Ministry of Interior in the Netherlands. September 2005.

Secondly, learning from policies adopted by countries struggling with suicide bombers could help other governments learn what works, and what clearly does not. For example, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman argues that “we must change our approach to defending against suicide attacks” because profiling *ne marche pas*.⁶⁵ Profiling is less effective today because the face of terror has changed. Once only a man’s “sport,” women are now terrorists, as are younger members of society. Hoffman maintains that in the absence of knowing who the perpetrator is, “the best defense relies on mobilizing the *entire* security force against the threat.” This requires increasing training for police and adding special units to law enforcement whose job it is to combat suicide bombers.⁶⁶ Also key to uprooting terrorism is to know what has failed. For example, abduction of Chechen women by Russian security forces to avenge attacks against Russian civilians by Chechen female terrorists may fuel resentment and motivate, rather than deter, women from joining terrorist groups.⁶⁷

In addition, improving liaison services’ email collection of female, and male, users seeking participation in attacks can provide opportunities to disrupt the terrorist networks online. As more violent organizations escape the public eye and operate underground, the Internet will be the key to their survival; that is, the Internet can replenish the organization’s losses with new recruits, a stable source of income, an exchange of operational tactics, and ultimately, evade capture by the security service. Women have the most to gain from this open venue, particularly women residing in a dominant culture that prohibits interaction with men, and disallows women equal opportunities. Tapping into this “market” will require that authorities’ have technical abilities *and* linguistic skills to veil their identities when entering the chat room.

Finally, intelligence would not be intelligence without recruitment. Perhaps the only way to acquire operational nuggets about the plans and intentions of terrorist organizations is to enter the network. How this can be accomplished without exposing the Western hand will require additional research and focus. If access to male terrorists is a hurdle we continue to face, then entrée to militant Muslim women is an even greater challenge.

⁶⁵ French for “it doesn’t work.”

⁶⁶ Hoffman, Bruce, “The Logic of Suicide Terrorism” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 291, no. 5, June 2003, pp. 46-47.

⁶⁷ Baker, Peter, “New Stage of Fear For Chechen Women,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2004. A Section: A12.